

Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

FACT SHEET

What is pertussis?

Pertussis (whooping cough) is a highly contagious, bacterial disease marked by severe coughing. It is named after the "whoop" sound children and adults make when they try to breathe in during or after a severe coughing spell.

Who gets it?

Pertussis can occur at any age, but infants and young children are at highest risk of life-threatening consequences. Undiagnosed mild disease in older children, adolescents, and adults contributes to the spread of the illness among infants and young children.

How is it spread?

Pertussis is caused by a bacteria found in the mouth, nose and throat of an infected person. Transmission to others occurs during close contact with an infected person, most commonly by airborne droplets of respiratory secretions.

What are the symptoms?

Pertussis usually starts with cold or flu-like symptoms such as runny nose, sneezing, fever and a mild cough. These symptoms can last up to 2 weeks and are followed by increasingly severe coughing spells. The coughing attacks may last for many months in the "classic illness" or just a few days in the mild form of the disease. Mild pertussis disease is difficult to diagnose because its symptoms mimic those of a cold. Usually a prolonged cough is present, but without the "whoop". Recovery occurs gradually over 2 to 3 weeks. Fever, if present, is usually mild.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms appear between 6 to 21 days (average 7-10) after exposure to the bacteria.

When and for how long can it be spread?

The contagious period is from 7 days following exposure to 3 weeks after onset of severe coughing spells. It is most contagious during the first two to three weeks of infection, often before the beginning of severe coughing spells.

Does past infection with pertussis make a person immune?

Children who have recovered from culture-confirmed pertussis do not need further doses of pertussis vaccine.

How do you treat it?

Pertussis is treated with antibiotics and patients are advised to take all prescribed medication and avoid contact with anyone, particularly small infants and children. Anyone who is exposed to pertussis should also be given antibiotics to prevent the disease.

What are some potential complications?

Pneumonia is the most common complication and cause of pertussis-related deaths. Young infants are at highest risk for pertussis-related complications, including seizures, encephalopathy (swelling of the brain), and otitis media (severe ear infection). There are about 10-15 deaths each year in the United States.

How do you prevent it?

Immunization against pertussis with DTaP vaccine is recommended by both the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and should be administered in 5 doses: at 2, 4, 6, and 15-18 months of age and 4 - 6 years of age. The vaccine is not given to people 7 years of age and older.

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